

POISONS AND HARMFUL SUBSTANCES

Harmful Substances

Each year thousands of people become injured or ill due to the effects of an unintentional harmful substance exposure. This may occur by direct skin contact, inhalation, absorption or ingestion of the substance into the body.

There are basic principles to consider:

- There are generally no antidotes for most poisoning.
- Small children can get protective caps off bottles faster than most adults.
- Siblings share, even with pets.
- Children do not always admit the truth or truly know the amount ingested.

Harmful substances are defined as chemicals, products and plants that threaten the safety of people and pets.

Harmful chemicals commonly found in homes and schools include ammonia, bleach, dish soap, antifreeze, alcohol, insecticides, paint, petroleum products (kerosene and turpentine), herbicides, pesticides, drain cleaner, pine oil cleaner, spray cleaners, certain cosmetics, swimming pool additives, prescription and non-prescription medications, recreational drugs, tobacco products, mothballs and disc batteries among others. Common harmful plant exposures include mushrooms, poinsettias and oleanders.

A harmful exposure is not always identifiable unless the person involved tells someone, asks for help or behaves inappropriately. Children are more likely not to tell an adult that they have swallowed some pills because they fear punishment.

Adults then must learn to recognize a harmful exposure incident by carefully watching children in their care for signs of unusual odors or unusual behavior. The most obvious sign of a harmful exposure may be open pill bottles, plants that have obviously been

chewed on or eaten from, open containers or a child complaining of a "tummy ache." It is important when caring for children that an adult survey areas where the children have access, especially high-risk areas such as the garage, kitchen or bathroom.

Most harmful substance exposures in the toddler and child age groups occur when a youngster ingests an over-the-counter or prescription medicine such as cough medicine and cold preparations, ibuprofen, acetomenaphen, Tylenol, aspirin and multi-vitamins.

Adults most often have swallowed improperly stored liquids in glasses, bottles, jars and other containers accounting for the largest number of harmful substance exposures in that age group.

Survival Actions

If a chemical or hazardous substance spill occurs, evacuate the area immediately. Continued exposure to the substance may be harmful. Call the fire department by dialing 9-1-1. If a person swallows a chemical or household product, call 9-1-1 immediately.

If a person ingests any un-prescribed drug or overdoses on a medication, do not give them anything by mouth. Call 9-1-1.

If a harmful substance gets into the eyes, flush immediately with water. Have the person blink frequently, but do not force the eyelid open. If it is serious, call 9-1-1. Otherwise, call Poison Control.

If a harmful substance comes in contact with the skin, flush with water. One exception is the chemical lime. If this comes in contact with the skin, first dust the product off the skin to avoid a chemical burn and then flush with water. If it is serious, call 9-1-1. Otherwise, call Poison Control.

If a person inhales a harmful substance such as a pesticide spray, cleaning product or natural gas, get them to fresh air quickly. Do not place yourself at risk. Open doors and windows to air the contaminated room or building. If it is serious, call 9-1-1. Otherwise,

call Poison Control. If someone is stung by a bee, wasp or bitten by a spider, snake or an unidentified creature, call Poison Control.

In general, if an exposure appears life threatening (the person is dizzy or weak, has a chemical burn or is short of breath), call 9-1-1. If the person is unconscious, do not give anything by mouth. If it appears minor in nature, or additional advice is needed, call the Poison Control Center at the Guam Memorial Hospital at (671) 647-2281 / 647-2489.

Preventing A Harmful Exposure

Keep all harmful substances out of sight and reach and do not store them under the sink. "Childproof" caps are not childproof. They can be opened, given a child's remarkable resources and ability to explore.

Install safety locks on all medicine cabinets, drawers and cupboards where harmful substances are stored. These substances include:

- prescription medicine
- over-the-counter drugs and vitamins
- cleaning supplies
- household chemicals
- painting supplies
- automotive fluids and oils
- insecticides, pesticides and herbicides

Teach toddlers and young children to "always ask first" before touching or sampling something new.

Never leave children alone with a harmful substance that the adult is using.

Store household chemicals away from food to prevent contamination. Keep cleaning products and medications out of the kitchen.

Many senior citizens request their prescription medicines not be packaged in "childproof" bottles. Special precautions should be taken in households where young children and senior citizens live together.

Do not take medications in front of children. They may wish to mimic you, especially if the medication is designed to make you "feel better."

Never tell a child medicine tastes like candy.

Keep all medications in their original bottles.

When taking or giving medicines at night, turn on a light to see what is being administered. Be sure all medicines, cosmetics and personal care products are stored out of children's reach and not in nightstands or on dresser tops.

Dispose of old medications by flushing them down the toilet. Other items, such as shampoo and mouthwash should be stored away from children because of their attractive smells and high alcohol content.

A key should be kept available outside the bathroom if the door has a lock on it.

Visitors to the home should use the same care in preventing harmful substance exposures.

Suitcases should not be left open for children to explore.

After adults have a party, all smoking materials including butts and ashes should be extinguished and discarded. All unfinished alcoholic beverages should be poured down the drain. Tobacco products and alcoholic drinks, even in small amounts, are dangerous to children and pets. The garage and storage areas can contain weed killer, fertilizer, window cleaner, car wax, paint products, pool chemicals, antifreeze and other harmful substances. Place them out of a child's reach and store them in their original, labeled container.

When a chemical container is empty, rinse it out with water and replace the cap before throwing it away in a covered trashcan.

Know the names of the plants in your garden and lawn. Keep a list handy in case a child or pet ingests one. Remember, even common houseplants may be harmful or deadly when swallowed.